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Disney Ski Plan: Still Wanted?

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The U.S. Forest Service wants to know if there still is public support for a ski development at Mineral King in Sequoia National Forest, 228 miles northeast of Los Angeles.

To this end, the Forest Service recently issued a draft environmental impact statement on Walt Disney Productions' proposed master plan for developing Mineral King, and now is soliciting public response, which must be submitted in writing to regional Forest Service headquarters by March 31.

The environmental statement of nearly 300 pages considers briefly four alternates to the Disney plan and six alternate transportation systems.

If there is enough public support, the Forest Service plans to recommend going ahead despite the long delays, a spokesman said. That decision should be announced this summer.

Back in January, 1966, after competitive bidding, the Forest Service awarded development rights for an all-year recreational area at Mineral King to Disney. In 1965, the state legislature had added the Mineral King road to the state highway system, and the following year $3 million in federal money was granted to the state toward developing a two-lane, all-weather highway into the area.

On Jan. 8, 1969, Disney submitted a master plan proposing 18 ski lifts, lodging for up to 6,000 persons and service facilities. There also would be ski touring and at least one ski jump. The Forest Service approved the concept two weeks later.

In June, 1969, the Sierra Club sued the government to prevent development, and Mineral King has been in litigation since. In the interim, the state legislature removed the Mineral King highway beyond Oak Grove from the state highway system. (The environmental statement proposes as the preferred substitute an electric, cog-assisted railroad from Oak Grove to the proposed Mineral King Village.)

Although the Supreme Court ruled against the Sierra Club in 1972, the environmental group filed an amended suit which still is awaiting trial.

In addition to trying to ascertain public support for Mineral King, the draft environmental statement also meets one issue in the amended suit which said the government had failed to prepare and circulate for public comment an adequate environmental statement under the Environmental Policy Act of 1969.

Of late, after the court impasse, Mineral King has been considered by



some to be a dead issue, particularly since Disney said it was studying a location in Northern California for a ski area.

However, Bob Hicks, Disney's project manager for Mineral King, says the company has not lost interest.

"We continue to believe Mineral King is the best site for winter sports development for the Southern California market," he said.

But that does not necessarily mean the firm would go ahead with a court OK.

"We'd have to restudy the project because the recommended change from a highway to a cog railroad has major financial implications," he said.

This change would affect the number and type of visitors, he said. The project had been conceived as 60% day-use visitors and 40% overnight visitors.

The cost of a cog railroad ticket might discourage day use and make the area more of a destination resort.

Hicks said Disney's interest in a resort in the Northern Sierra would not preclude developing Mineral King too —"That serves a different market."

Mineral King has taken on added importance for Southern California skiers, considering proposals for new oil taxes or gasoline rationing.

Mineral King is nearly 100 miles closer to Los Angeles than Mammoth Mountain and, as the environmental statement notes:

"Mineral King is the only remaining area where high-quality, large-scale winter sports opportunities can be provided at a location reasonably accessible to Southern California."

The report cites other skiing advantages of Mineral King:

—Superlative ski terrain, most of it suitable for intermediate skiers.

—Seven developable ski bowls with northern exposure.

—A potential vertical drop of more than 3,700 feet which "surpasses that of any existing winter sports area in California."

—Moderate winter weather (average midwinter maximum temperatures in the mid-40s, average minimum in the low 20s, with colder readings to zero and 10 below).

—A high U-shaped rim that protects it from winds.

There is no question a huge Southern California market exists for a Mineral King resort.

The statement estimates demand will jump from an estimated 1.5 million or 1.6 million skier days next season to between 3.3 million and 3.89 million in 1985-86.

Even with the projected maximum development of Mammoth to handle 21,300 skiers a day, as well as one-third of the skier days being spent out of state, and the Tahoe area and Southern California mountain resorts absorbing another 29%, the unmet skier demand a decade from now still would be 984,060 to 1.2 million skier days, the report estimates.

The report estimates that at full capacity, Mineral King skier expenditures would reach nearly $10 million —$3.2 million for lift, lessons and rentals and $6.4 million for lodging, meals, transportation, etc.

The four alternatives to the Disney proposal mentioned in the statement were:

—No project at all.

—Increased summer use, but no development of winter sports facilities.

—Low-level, year-round development with a maximum accommodation for 2,500 (compared to 10,000 in the Disney plan).

—High-level, year-round development to accommodate a maximum of 20,000 visitors during the winter.

Copies of the draft environmental statement are available for review in some libraries and at the Angeles National Forest headquarters in Pasadena.